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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 001797

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SA/INS AND DS/OP/NEA
LONDON FOR POL - RIEDEL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PTER ASEC PGOV NP

SUBJECT: NEPAL: MAOIST STRIKE GENERALLY OBSERVED IN
KATHMANDU VALLEY

REF: KATHMANDU 1693 AND PREVIOUS

SHOPS CLOSED; VEHICLES IDLE

11. (U) The general strike, or "bandh," called by Maoist insurgents nationwide for September 16 appeared to have been generally observed in the Kathmandu metropolitan area. Only about five percent of the shops along main thoroughfares in the city opened (although some along less-traveled side streets defied the ban), and few private vehicles--with the exception of a rare motorcycle or two--were observed plying the streets. Even government vehicles, which had made a point of traveling the roads during the five-day strike in April, this time seemed few and far between. Foot traffic, however, was heavy, and many Kathmanduites appeared to spend the day sitting in front of their shuttered homes and shops, chatting. Sources in the adjoining cities of Patan and Bhaktapur reported a similar drop in traffic. A quick telephone survey of five districts in different parts of the country revealed that while some shops in district headquarters had opened, private vehicles--including long-distance buses--were not operating.

GENERAL CALM;
SOME BOMBS

12. (U) The streets of Kathmandu and adjoining cities were generally reported calm throughout the day. Early in the morning two bombs exploded in neighboring Bhaktapur, but no casualties were reported. Security personnel defused another would-be early-morning bomb near the entrance to a boys' school in adjoining Lalitpur. One suspect was apprehended after attempting to place a bomb near a popular Kathmandu hotel at 6:00 a.m. September 16. A mid-day report over Nepali radio that authorities had apprehended a suicide bomber proved to be fictitious.

13. (U) The preceding day bombs were found at five different locations across Kathmandu. Two of the bombs exploded, one less than a kilometer from the British Embassy. (The suspected target was a dairy corporation building; no injuries were reported.) Another explosive, placed near a police post, injured five when it detonated.

COMMENT

14. (SBU) That the September 16 strike seems to have been better observed, at least in the Kathmandu Valley, by a greater portion of the general public than previous bandhs over the past year may be attributed to several factors. First, the two weeks preceding the bandh witnessed intensified Maoist activity, particularly in the form of scattered improvised explosive devices, within Kathmandu proper (Reftel). Second, the insurgents' surprise attacks on a police post and a district headquarters in different parts of the country, in which more than 100 members of the security forces were killed, undoubtedly scared people lulled into a false sense of security by the monsoon moratorium on hostilities. Third, the Maoists recently have stepped up violent activities against civilian targets--usually local-level political figures in rural areas--in an effort to discourage participation in upcoming national elections. Finally--and perhaps most decisive--was the Government of Nepal (GON) approach to the bandh this time. Before the April bandh, the GON launched a public relations offensive against the strike, pledging openly to provide security to any business that opened and encouraging private vehicles to defy the bandh by running government-plated vehicles up and down the streets. This time, however, the GON made a conscious decision to adopt a low-profile reaction in order to deny the insurgents any additional publicity for their effort. But absent any clear signal from the GON, this time many business owners apparently decided not to take a chance and remained closed. We expect the Maoists to tout the high

observance of the bandh as a victory.
MALINOWSKI